

# Theological Ethics and Interreligious Relations: A Baptist Christian Perspective

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## Chapter 7

# **Theological Ethics and Interreligious Relations: a Baptist Christian Perspective**

*Paul Weller*

This chapter offers a contribution to the ecumenical overview and exploration of issues in interreligious relations, and a theological and ecclesiological reflection upon these, that is self-consciously and explicitly from within a specific Christian confessional tradition – namely that of the Baptist tradition. In the European context out of which this chapter is written, the Baptist tradition is a relatively small one. Globally, however, it is far from being an ecumenical footnote, as it is one of the largest confessional traditions of Christianity with over forty-six million members who are linked with the Baptist World Alliance (BWA).<sup>1</sup> There are likely around another fifty million in groups that do not link with the BWA. In Europe, the Baptist tradition has around one million members, but it has sometimes been viewed by Catholics, by Protestants of the Magisterial Reformation, as well as by the Orthodox, as a somewhat “sectarian” form of Christianity – often meant in the more theologically and popularly pejorative sense of that term rather than its more descriptive Weberian and sociological sense. But it is precisely from this tradition that this chapter seeks to offer a number of theological keynotes central to the Baptist tradition that can make a timely contribution to the evolution of a more rounded ecumenical theological reflection on interreligious relations.

In approaching these themes in a way that is specifically informed by a Baptist theological (and perhaps even more importantly, ecclesiological) perspective, this should not be misunderstood as uncritical advocacy of one confessional tradition as a whole over and against other forms of Christianity. There is much of richness, importance, and corrective balance that other Christian traditions also offer to this theme and which those within the Baptist tradition need to hear, receive and work with in a self-critical way. But it is precisely

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bwanet.org/>

because there are *distinctive* notes within various Christian traditions that the Baptist tradition has theological impulses and resources that can be offered to assist in the ecumenical task of reflection on interreligious relations.

## **Context**

Before exploring each of the keynotes of “freedom”, “witness” and “theological ethics” that form the main structure and substance of this chapter, it is important to begin by directing attention to our contemporary socio-religious context, especially in Europe. This is because, as a matter of description, theological reflection does not take place in a way abstracted from its historical and sociological context. But in addition, as a matter of prescription it can be argued that it *cannot* be conducted in an intellectually, morally, or socially responsible way without such engagement. In other words, insofar as any systematic theology may still be possible today, it must not be undertaken only within the closed circle of the Christian community. Theological reflection is to be undertaken in the context of actual interreligious *relations* and not only of thinking about these. As the still relevant 1979 World Council of Churches *Guidelines on Dialogue* so clearly expressed it, “... dialogue should proceed in terms of people of other faiths and ideologies rather than of theoretical, impersonal systems.”<sup>2</sup> Or, as argued by the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter in the closing chapter of his seminal book *No Other Name?*, what we need is a model of truth that “will no longer be identified by its ability to exclude, or absorb others. Rather, what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to relate to other expressions of truth and to grow through these relationships – truth defined not by exclusion but by relation.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it is arguable that how each religion relates to the diversity of religions and other beliefs in our globalizing and pluralizing world is critical both for the further development of the religions themselves, as well as for the internal peace and stability of states and societies, and for international relations. In a variation on Anselm’s dictum that theology is “faith seeking understanding” we might rather espouse an approach to

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<sup>2</sup> World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue* (Geneva: WCC, 1979), 11.

<sup>3</sup> P. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 219.

theology as ‘faith-in-relation seeking understanding’, within the relational aspect of which one can also find the necessary element of the ‘works’ that give substance and effect to faith. Indeed, if ‘faith-in-relation seeking understanding’ is adopted as the basis of an approach to ecumenical theological reflection, then what are the implications for interreligious relations in a European context in which there is evidence that many of the major institutional Churches of Europe continue to rely on what Stuart Murray calls the “vestiges of Christendom”<sup>4</sup>? In this context it is at least arguable that numbers of ordinary European Christians are beginning to confuse a loss of former Christendom privilege with the kind of exclusion and even persecution that Christians do experience in some other parts of the world. Thus in a recent research project’s exploration of the “complex aspects of the relationship between religion, belonging, loss and nostalgia in the context of a changing religion and belief landscape”<sup>5</sup> in England and Wales, an Anglican Christian vicar gave voice to the poignant feeling that “It’s almost like losing the empire all over again, it’s just that it’s the empire of your own country.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, it is arguable that an analytical framework provided by an emphasis on post-Christendom presents a perhaps less accurate and nuanced one than may be justified by the continuing socio-religious reality. For a number of years, I have argued instead for an analytical framework that begins from recognition of what I have called the “three dimensional” nature of contemporary European socio-religious reality and its implications for both Christian theological and ecclesiological practice,<sup>7</sup> and for wider social policy in relation to religion and belief.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> S. Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> P. Weller, K. Purdam, N. Ghanea and S. Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury 2013), 114.

<sup>6</sup> Weller *et al.*, *Religion and Belief*, 114.

<sup>7</sup> See P. Weller, *Time for a Change: Reconfiguring Religion, State and Society* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 73.

<sup>8</sup> See P. Weller, K. Purdam, N. Ghanea and S. Cheruvallil-Contractor (2013), *Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales: A Decade of Continuity and Change. A Research Informed Policy Brief, 2013*, University of Derby, Derby; on-line at [http://www.derby.ac.uk/files/policy\\_brief.pdf](http://www.derby.ac.uk/files/policy_brief.pdf)

What is meant by this is that, while we no longer live in the “one dimensional” socio-religious unity of the Christendom that has been the classical ideal that has shaped so much of the European histories of Catholic, Magisterial Protestant and Orthodox thinking, by all available indices the Christian inheritance nevertheless remains an important part of our contemporary socio-religious context. But in contrast to what might then be called the “two dimensional” tension, and sometimes conflict, between Christendom and the rise of the secular that characterised so much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is arguable our current socio-religious context has evolved into a more complex “three dimensional” one in which the growing religious plurality in Europe is increasingly changing the terms of the debate between the historic protagonists of the Christendom approach and its secularising alternatives.

Of course, European history has before now contained a degree of religious diversity, with the continued salience of pre-Christian pagan traditions (and not only in the Baltic region and Iceland); the Muslim presence in the Iberian peninsula and in the Balkans; and, of course, the substantial Jewish presence before the *Shoah* (Holocaust) of European Jewry. But today this diversity has a contemporary scale and impact which, through migration and refugee movements of people, is becoming both quantitatively and qualitatively different.<sup>9</sup> According to the Pew Research Centre<sup>10</sup>, out of a European population (including Russia) of 742.55 million in 2010 this included the presence of around 44.1 million Muslims; 1.2 million Hindus; 1.33 million Buddhists; and, even after the impact of the Holocaust, around 1.41 million Jews. And this is not counting Sikhs, Bahá’ís, Jains, Zoroastrians, Pagans and followers of various New Religious Movements.

### **Distinctive Contributions of the Baptist Vision of Christianity**

If the preceding contextual premise is correct, and in Europe this means we are living in a “three dimensional” socio-religious reality, then taking

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<sup>9</sup> There are no consistent and fully reliable statistics on religious affiliation across Europe as a whole. Religious affiliation statistics are not collected on a pan-European or even a European Union basis, although there are a number of surveys that relate to European religious belief and practice. Data on religious affiliation are differentially collected and therefore the best data that exist are only estimates.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

full account of each of the three dimensions is a necessary part of theological reflection. And, if so, then it is also necessary to develop a theological approach that, together with integrity in relation to its Christian religious roots, can also accommodate and engage with this “three dimensional” reality. It is the argument of this chapter that it is precisely in this “three dimensional” socio-religious reality that the identified keynotes of Baptist Christian tradition can make a theologically grounded but also contextually relevant and distinctive contribution to ecumenical reflection on interreligious relations.

### *Religious Freedom*

Baptist convictions about religious freedom emerged against a European religious and political background of Wars of Religion in which Christendom had been devouring itself in fratricidal religious conflict of a kind that eventually led to a reactive movement to banish religion and religious difference into the “private” sphere. But it is important to understand that, unlike the emergent humanistic and politically liberal commitment to religious freedom, the kind of approach that was developed in the Baptist tradition is one that is theologically grounded. Today, there are certainly significant sectors of contemporary Baptist life that have lost sight of the importance of this historic emphasis. However, in most times and places, the tradition has had a consistent emphasis on religious liberty to the extent that it is at least arguable that this emphasis is the nearest to a universal commitment that can be found among Baptists. In the course of his survey on *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, Wilbur Kitchener Jordan argued that,

The great Baptist apologists had made profoundly important contributions to the theory of religious toleration. They had systematised the thought of their predecessors and had broken new ground in their examination of the forces which had for so many centuries made religious devotion synonymous with religious bigotry.<sup>11</sup>

The earliest expression of this was in the Baptist Christian leader, Thomas Helwys’ 1612 pamphlet addressed to King James I, and called *The Mystery of Iniquity*. This presented the first sustained argument for

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<sup>11</sup> W. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, Volume I (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1936), 314.

religious liberty published in the English language, with Helwys eloquently and boldly arguing that:

O Let the King judge is it not most equal, that men should choose their religion themselves seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves, when it shall be no excuse for them to say, we were commanded or compelled to be of this religion, by the king, or by them that had authority from him.<sup>12</sup>

Helwys paid for his courage and convictions with the loss of his liberty, and eventually with his life. However, his early advocacy of religious liberty was repeatedly followed by other individual Baptists; was frequently stated in Baptist confessions of faith; and became a founding commitment when the Baptist World Alliance was formed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In itself, the centrality of this commitment to religious liberty is noteworthy as compared with what one finds in other Christian traditions where the emergence of such a commitment has been only very much more recent and often only somewhat grudgingly conceded as the acceptance of toleration of the socially and religiously acceptable, rather than as a more full-blooded affirmation of religious liberty for all.

But what should especially be noted here is that, remarkably for the times in which he lived, Helwys did not apply this element of his vision only to the self-interest of his own excluded and persecuted group; nor indeed only to the wider diversities of Christian belief; instead he held to the position, in itself already remarkable for its seventeenth century context, that freedom of religion should also extend beyond the borders of Christianity. Thus classically and succinctly Helwys declared: “Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”<sup>13</sup>

In speaking within this of ‘Turks’, in the language of his time and place, Helwys was, of course, referring to Muslims. Although this was unusual in the wider context of European Christianity, it could be argued since Jews and Turks posed little immediate demographic or military threat in the geographical context of seventeenth century England, that Baptist support for their religious freedom did not mean as much as might

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<sup>12</sup> T. Helwys, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, in R. Groves (ed.), *Thomas Helwys: A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 37.

<sup>13</sup> Helwys, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, in R. Groves (1998), 53.

seem to be implied with the benefit of hindsight. However, this would be to misunderstand the theological roots of the Baptist commitment to religious freedom which, in many ways, can be understood more closely by looking at its relevance in relation to other Christian traditions.

Certainly in the context of English history, the depth and tenacity of this commitment can be seen in the general determination among Baptists to include Catholic Christians among those entitled to such freedom at a time when English Protestants feared a possible restoration of the Roman Catholic Church that they believed would threaten their own liberty. Perhaps in resonance with the kind contemporary fears that have been articulated about Muslims, in the seventeenth century and beyond, many Baptists shared in the widespread Protestant perception that Catholics were basically disloyal to the country and were thus potentially subversives. The ubiquity and depth of this concern about Catholics and Catholicism is perhaps difficult to appreciate today in terms of its visceral nature. But the literary scholar Arthur Marrotti provides a good insight into this, explaining that, as a scholar of literature, he is not so much concerned with historical “facts” as with what has been the place of “Catholics” and “Catholicism” in what he calls the “cultural imaginary”. As Marrotti summarises: “The Gunpowder Plot produced England’s first national day (Gunpowder Treason Day, later Guy Fawkes Day), and it established a firm association of Catholicism with terrorist ruthlessness, heightening the fears of Catholic murderousness and subversion that lasted not decades but centuries.”<sup>14</sup> Timothy Larsen made the connection between this and the issue of Roman Catholic emancipation:

In Victorian Britain, the Church of Rome was seen as a persecuting, illiberal body. The Inquisition was its heritage, and the treatment of Protestants in Catholic countries was still thought to be despicable. It was assumed that if Catholicism ever came to dominate Britain again, religious liberty would be swept away. There was a long tradition of viewing Catholicism as a threat to the established government of the nation, with the Gun Powder Plot as just one link in the chain.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Marrotti, A., *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 144.

<sup>15</sup> T. Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in MidVictorian England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 239.



And when one adds to that the substantial theological divergences that existed with Catholics, the fact that Baptists by and large<sup>16</sup> remained true to their principles by including Catholics within their stand for religious liberty is convincing evidence about the theological grounding of these convictions. In relation to such exceptions that did exist, a survey article by T. George that “They clearly are exceptions to the larger Baptist consensus that continued to advocate unrestricted religious liberty.”<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, a commitment to religious liberty should not be taken as an indifference to questions of religious truth or as unwillingness to engage in robust disputation with others. Thus Roger Williams, who became a Baptist and founded the first Baptist church in North America, in his 1644 classic work on religious liberty maintained:

... it is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son, the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish or anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and that they are to be fought against with the sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God’s spirit, the word of God.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin Evans, as a Baptist of his time, in the Preface to his 1855 book on *Modern Popery* argued on the one hand, in relation to Catholic doctrines, that he was “second to none in his unmingled hatred of their doctrines” yet nevertheless, on the other hand, asserted “with regard to the civil rights of Romanists, (I am) still an unwavering friend”.<sup>18</sup> With reference to other than Christian religious traditions, the Baptist Leonard Busher, in his 1614 *Religion’s Peace*, alongside the arguments made on theological and ecclesiological grounds, also challenged Christians by

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<sup>16</sup> In his 1644 statement on religious liberty, *The Storming of the Antichrist, in His Two Last and Strongest Garrisons: Of Compulsion of Conscience and Infant Baptism*, the Baptist theologian Christopher Blackwood made an exception of religious liberty for Catholics, even going so far as to say that it could be appropriate for the earthly powers to remove them from the country if their numbers threatened – or, in modern parlance, to deport them – at the point of a sword, in other words with the use of force, at least backed up by the threat, if not actuality, of violence.

<sup>17</sup> T. George, ‘Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Volume 58, No.1 (1984), 49.

<sup>18</sup> B. Evans, *Modern Popery: A Series of Letters Upon Some of Its More Important Aspects* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1855), v–vi.

reference to historical descriptions of the Muslim treatment of Christians and Jews in Constantinople. In this pamphlet Busher pointed out that,

I read that a bishop of Rome would have constrained a Turkish emperor to the Christian faith, unto whom the emperor answered, 'I believe that Christ was an excellent prophet, but he did never, so far as I understand, command that men should, with the power of weapons be constrained to believe his law: and verily I also do force no man to Mahomet's law.' And I read that Jews, Christians, and Turks are tolerated in Constantinople, and yet are peaceable, though so contrary the one to the other.<sup>19</sup>

And in 1660 four Baptists from Kent issued, from prison, a tract in which – albeit betraying a common misunderstanding among Christians of the time that Muslims were worshippers of Muhammad – they pointed up the absurdity of requiring one's religion to mirror the religion of one's rulers:

Thus, if we had lived in Turkey we must receive the Koran, and be a worshipper of Mahomet; if in Spain, be a papist; in England, sometimes a papist, as in Henry Eighth's days, a Protestant in Edward Sixth's, a papist again in Queen Mary's, and a Protestant again in Queen Elizabeth's. And so for ever, as the authority changes religion, must we do the same. But God forbid.<sup>20</sup>

While Busher used the example of others as a challenge to better reciprocity of behaviour among Christians in general, the tract used an argument of *reductio ad absurdum* of a kind that could be broadly accessible to people who might not share any theological convictions. Nevertheless, in general, the Baptist inheritance of religious freedom is not to be understood in terms of an emergent 'rationalist', 'humanistic', 'liberal' or 'modern' adaptation to a plural world consequent initially upon weariness with religious conflict, and more recently, as a by-product of the loss of the power or influence of traditional religion in the public sphere. Rather, it is rooted in a particular and distinctive understanding of the relationship between human beings and the divine, and between the community of Christian disciples and the wider community that was also informed by a particular approach to the

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<sup>19</sup> L. Busher, 'Religion's Peace: Or a Plea for Liberty of Conscience', in E. Underhill (ed.), *Tracts on the Liberty of Conscience and Persecution, 1614–1667* (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1846), 24.

<sup>20</sup> James Blackmore, George Hammon, William Jeffrey and John Reve, 'An Humble Petition and Representation of the Sufferings of Several Peaceable and Innocent Subjects Called by the Name of Anabaptists' (1660) in: Underhill, *Tracts*, 301.

Christian scriptural tradition that prioritised a soteriological and Christological hermeneutic and generally eschewed the use of creeds. Indeed, it is rooted also in a view of religious truth *per se* that, ultimately, has confidence in the inherent power of the reality to which its truth claims point. In other words, this keynote of religious freedom is neither an expression of religious indifferentism, nor is it a pragmatic approach to the management of religious plurality and/or conflict – although the potential pragmatic benefits of this might be recognized.

The soteriological and Christological hermeneutic contrasted with the more totalising attempts – from both the Magisterial and revolutionary Anabaptist wings of the Reformation – to invoke the theocratic patterns of the Hebrew Scriptures as a template for the establishment of a civil community. While the Baptist tradition has generally held to a high view of the authority of scripture, and this has sometimes degenerated into a form of Biblicism, there has also been within it a conviction that the community of believers needs always to engage afresh with the source documents of the Christian tradition in order to discern how they are *now* being addressed by those same scriptures.<sup>21</sup> As the early co-leader of the Baptist community with Thomas Helwys, John Smyth, put it when recognising that the scriptures are not self-explanatory and that their interpretation is therefore always open to correction: “We are in constant error; my earnest desire is that my last writing may be taken as my present judgement.”<sup>22</sup>

Many *confessions* of faith have been produced, around which Baptist Christians have united in particular times and contexts. However, these have not generally been viewed as universal creedal *definitions* of faith. This is why the great Southern Baptist theologian, Edgar Mullins, in his classic book of Baptist theology used the very vivid phrase of “soul freedom” to speak of the great importance of the principle of religious liberty both within and beyond the Church.<sup>23</sup> And, in this theologically-informed Christian commitment to religious freedom, it is precisely because what one believes and practices matters profoundly that religious

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<sup>21</sup> J. McClendon Jnr, ‘What is a “Baptist” Theology?’ *American Baptist Quarterly*, Volume 1, No. 1 (1982), 16–39.

<sup>22</sup> J. Smith, cited in P. Ballard, ‘The Dynamic of Independency’, *The Baptist Quarterly*, Volume 23 (1969–70), 245.

<sup>23</sup> E. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908).

freedom is so important. In other words, a theologically informed affirmation of religious freedom of this kind facilitates the possibility of an ethical practice in which truth claims can be advocated, but where the freedom of the other to accept or not to accept these claims is seen as being theologically rooted in the nature of humanity. And this leads to a consideration of the continued salience of the second keynote from the Baptist tradition on which this paper focuses – namely that of Christian witness.

## **Christian Witness**

Alongside its commitment to religious liberty, the Baptist vision of Christianity has, for much of its history (though due to the Calvinist influence within some of its branches, not as widely as in its commitment to religious liberty), also held strongly to the importance of Christian witness. Therefore, as the Baptist theologian and Old Testament scholar, Henry Wheeler-Robinson, noted: “It is not an accident of history that [Baptists] have led the way in foreign missionary work; it is a logical and obvious deduction from their emphasis on individual faith. The measure of personal conviction is seen in its vigour of expansion, its zeal of propagation.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he was clear that: “... we cannot reverse this and say that where there is propagating zeal, there is the Christian conviction of a world-gospel, because many other motives may lead men to become zealous proselytisers.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, both in history and today, there are individual Christians and Christian groups that have engaged in forms of mission which, among those who have become the ‘target’ of such activities in a threatening or manipulative way have been experienced as being contrary to the nature of the message that the messengers purport to carry.

But by contrast with Christian modernists and postmodernists who – sometimes on epistemological grounds and sometimes, perhaps for pragmatic reasons – tend to downplay the question of the truthclaims classically made by Christianity, the keynote of witness in the Baptist tradition emphasises an understanding in which what it is believed has been ‘received’ in Christianity is to be seen as something not only for

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<sup>24</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1946), 81.

<sup>25</sup> Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 108.

itself as a particular cultural, ethnic or religious group, but rather as something with which it has been entrusted for sharing with the whole human community.

When all else is said and done, at the heart of Christian theology and witness is what Christians have discovered in Jesus. Jesus is the distinctive focus of the Christian way of being in the world and therefore needs to form the substantive content of Christian witness in terms both of words about him, and more importantly of actions patterned upon him. But in connecting this keynote with that of a theologically-grounded understanding of religious liberty, the style of Christian living and witnessing in a three dimensional world into which this translates is one in which modesty and integrity can be combined with realism and distinctiveness. In such an approach, both the theological and the social space of people of all religions and none is affirmed, to enable them to bear witness also to their own understanding of truth as well as to be free to make their response to what is shared with them by Christians. Within this, testimony to what has been received within each religion is believed to take place *before* God, and *in dialogue* with others whose integrity is affirmed and respected. This means that real witness is always *dialogical* and so, for Christians, what is received through the person of Jesus is something to which people of all cultures and religions are invited to respond. And this contrasts with an approach in which systematic theology, pastoral theology and theological ethics are separated, and pastoral theology and theological ethics become mere footnotes to an unwarranted focus of abstract doctrinal formulation.

On one reading, this could be said to be what happened in the early creedal formulations of Christianity. Although often understood as a means for bringing people into covenant relationship with God through Jesus and in the Spirit, as historically traced by Alistair Kee, in history the creeds took on the role of ideological instruments for ensuring the ‘unity’ of Church and therefore of the Empire.<sup>26</sup> Thus the Emperor Constantine, advised by Hosius, the Bishop of Cordoba in Spain, convened the Council of Nicea, paid expenses for those attending, and attended himself. Then he sought to enforce its creedal decisions. Against

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<sup>26</sup> A. Kee, *Constantine Versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology* (London: SCM Press, 1982).

such a background, the Baptist theologian J.W. McClendon Jr posed the following intriguing historical question:

Is it not worth considering how different might have been the history of Christianity, if after the Constantinian accession, the Christian leaders had met at Nicea, not to anathematise others' inadequate theological metaphysics, but to develop a strategy by which the church might remain the church in the light of the fateful political shift – to secure Christian social ethics before refining Christian dogma.<sup>27</sup>

To identify these historical and political problems in creed-making is not to argue away any theological significance for the creeds. There are, in fact, reasons for arguing that the early creeds played an important role in balancing the various divergent tendencies within early Christian theological thought from spinning off into 'heresy' – which, in its root meaning is not so much a matter of what is and what is not believed, but of existentially separating oneself from ongoing engagement with the wider body of Christian believers.

However, in the light of an approach to Christian witness rooted in a theological commitment to religious freedom, the question must surely also be posed as to the *adequacy* of these formulae, not to much on the basis of their intellectual cogency as on the grounds of *theological ethics*. Instead of becoming what the present author has elsewhere called a "Christology of creedal gatekeeping", an approach to Christian witness that is rooted in the theological ethics of a commitment to religious freedom for all can become a "Christology of invitation".<sup>28</sup> In such an approach, the *confession* of Jesus and the telling of the story about him can enable an encounter with Jesus in the way that *definitions* about him may not. In this way the *centrality of Jesus* as the key point of reference in the grammar of Christian belief and practice is maintained, while the *confession of Jesus* in a way that recognises the religious freedom of the other as a deep theological value offers the possibility for Christians and others to join in shared *Christological* exploration and encounter.

Thus the Jesus who is offered, and to whom people of all cultures and religions are invited to respond, is not in any way to be confused with being the 'property' of the Christian Church. To treat Jesus as if he were such property would, as the Baptist theologian Brian Haymes has argued,

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<sup>27</sup> McClendon Jr., 'What is a "Baptist" Theology', 39.

<sup>28</sup> See P. Weller, *God, Jesus and Dialogue: The Beech Lectures, 2005* (Bracknell: Newbold College Centre for the Study of Religious and Cultural Diversity, 2006).

mean that “Jesus is in danger of becoming merely a cult or tribal figure, the Christian God”, making Jesus into the God of a Christian form of tribalism.<sup>29</sup> And such an approach would, in fact, deny what the creedal formulations of Christian orthodoxy have been concerned to elucidate and to prevent from being lost: namely, that Jesus is not the private property of Christians alone.

Here, in fact, is arguably part of the real continuing value of the Trinitarian formulation of Christian experience. In popular piety, one can find many hymns to Jesus in a way that virtually equates Jesus and God. Similar issues can also be found in the founding basis of faith of the World Council of Churches that stated that it was a Fellowship of Churches that confesses “Jesus as Lord and God”. While the phrase “Jesus is Lord” is language with clear biblical precedent – and of course in Hebrew tradition the word ‘Lord’ is associated with the divine – the phrase “Jesus is God” is nowhere to be found in the scriptures and, I would submit, it is divergent from the tradition of Christian orthodox theology. Of course, Christian theology has always affirmed at least the presence, and usually the special and decisive presence of God in Jesus. But the theological significance of this is far from the same as saying “Jesus *is* God”. This latter comes very close to what might be described doctrinally as ‘Christomonism’ or ‘Jesuology’ or, when reflected in piety, as ‘Jesuolatry’. Referring to Christian Trinitarian language about God, Brian Haymes points out that:

... for all there is a crucial relationship between God and Jesus, there is more to God than Jesus Christ. In speaking of Jesus we believe we are making a statement about God and so we have resisted turning Jesus into a personal experience. It is in no way dishonouring to say that statements about Jesus Christ do not exhaust the meaning of God.<sup>30</sup>

Bearing witness to Jesus remains a calling for Christians. But this does not require the necessity of promoting definitive interpretations of his person and significance that can have the effect of closing him off from people of other religions. Christology needs to be undertaken within a theological and eschatological framework that underlines the provisionality of all contemporary claims to knowledge. If, by God, is

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<sup>29</sup> B. Haymes, ‘Covenant and the Church’s Mission’, in P. Fiddes, R. Hayden, R. Kidd, K. Clements and B. Haymes, *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: The Baptist Union, 1985), 69.

<sup>30</sup> Haymes, ‘Covenant and the Church’s Mission’, 69.

meant that which is unbounded and limitless; that which cannot be possessed by individuals; but also that which is the precondition for their existence; that which is the possibility for their interaction; and is also the ultimate criterion by which all things are judged, then, in mutual encounter within this, individuals – and maybe even groups – can perhaps begin to let go of their prejudices and assumptions, their limited perspectives; and ultimately their tendency to self-justification.

In such a ‘letting-go’, people of all religions can perhaps find that they are not, in fact, leaving behind their traditions in any sense that is unfaithful to their inheritance, but rather they are actually more deeply penetrating that to which their inheritance points or, perhaps, rather, being more deeply penetrated by such realities. What is found is not likely to be a common core of religions. That is too neat to be true to the rough edges of experience and of difference. Rather, what is discovered could be called a *differently angled experience* of the *same limitless ‘unboundedness’*. If God is limitless ‘unboundedness’, then living ‘in the Way’ of interreligious dialogue is actually *necessary* for approaching something of an appreciation this boundless Reality. For, just as the Christological understanding of the early Church emerged out of an intercultural and interreligious crucible and was informed by conscious engagement with other religions and philosophies, so also Christians today need to be engaged in a process of dialogical Christological discernment within a continued witness to Jesus. However, the requirements of theological ethics mean that this does not entail the necessity of promoting definitive interpretations of his person and significance, or of organizing the Church in ways that can have the practical effect of closing Jesus off from people of other than Christian religious traditions. By contrast with this, when an approach to Christian witness is rooted in a theological grounding for religious liberty, then the praxis of interreligious relations can be integrally understood as a ‘doing of the truth’ in which not so much *intellectual definition*, but rather *transformative understanding*, is involved.

Superficially considered, it may seem that a commitment to uphold religious freedom might fundamentally be incompatible with a desire to present the particular claims of the Christian Good News and to invite others to consider their validity for themselves. However, if one’s commitment to religious freedom is theologically and not only pragmatically grounded, then such an approach to religious freedom and



its consequences for the nature and shape of Christian witness enables these two things to be lived out in a creative tension rather than being in the impossible contradiction that both many traditionalist Christians and secular liberals believe they must inevitably entail. Thus, freedom and witness expressed through a focus on theological ethics are keynotes of the Baptist vision that offer religiously authentic, creative and corrective resources that can contribute to the ecumenical Christian enterprise of how contemporary Christians can live in a faithful, committed and peaceful way in a 'three dimensional' socio-religious world. But in closing this chapter seeks briefly also to outline something of how these keynotes can have implications for the shape of the Christian Church in the context of the wider states and societies in which it is set.

## **Implications of Baptist Keynotes for Church, State and Civil Society**

### *Ecclesiological Implications*

Since a key Baptist contribution to ecumenical ecclesiology is one that is expressed in a call to discipleship arising from the free commitment of Christian believers to Jesus as the determining point of reference for their lives, it insists that the shape of the Christian community and its style of witness lie at the very heart of the content of Christian theology and practice. As a corporate expression of theological ethics, ecclesiology needs to be central to the theological task, rather than being relegated to an ethical addendum or a derivative postscript to theology proper. Thus, in this vision, matters of ecclesiology and institutional practice are 'first order' matters concerned with the appropriate corporate shape of Christian existence and witness in a 'three dimensional' socio-religious environment. With relevance to this, Jürgen Moltmann argued that the future shape of Christianity is inevitably becoming that of a believer's church. Speaking from within the perspective of German Lutheranism, he noted:

Whatever forms the free churches in England, America, and then, since the beginning of the 19th century also in Germany have developed (there are, of course, dangers, mistakes and wrong developments enough here too), the future of the church of Christ lies in principle on this wing of the

Reformation because the widely unknown and uninhabited territory of the congregation is found here.<sup>31</sup>

The early leaders of the Christian movement now known as Baptist did not understand themselves to be founding a new branch of Christianity. Rather, they saw themselves as trying to bring about a restoration of the Christian Church of New Testament times from before what they came to see as its confusion with civil society consequent upon the adoption by the Emperor Constantine of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. And the name 'Baptist' was given by outsiders to those Christians whose particular form and style of being Christian was especially linked with their distinctive practice of not baptising babies but only those who themselves could personally make a Christian confession of faith.

In the context of ecumenical theological reflection on interreligious relations, one of the key effects of the practice of believer's baptism is that it symbolically challenges any geographical or social conception of the Christian Church as a body that is co-terminal with a nation or state. But although as a normative form of Christian baptismal practice what Baptists do is a relatively distinctive aspect of the Baptist vision of Christianity, this practice should not be isolated from the whole complex of ideas that surrounds it, nor from the overall religious vision and ethos within which that practice is embedded and which are relevant to the specific themes of this paper. Thus Wheeler Robinson, while maintaining that, "The Baptist stands or falls by his conception of what the Church is" went on to argue that "his plea for baptism becomes a mere archaeological idiosyncrasy, if it be not the expression of the fundamental constitution of the Church."<sup>32</sup>

For Baptists, the ecclesiological vision is primarily of a church constituted by freely choosing individuals who commit themselves to one another and to God in the Spirit and fellowship of the Good News of Jesus. In studies of ecclesiology and church history this is often described as a position of 'voluntarism' and it is the case that certain expressions of this approach have tended to portray the church as something like a democratic political party which one joins and leaves, and in which the

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<sup>31</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London: SCM Press, 1978), 117.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, 71.

context of a particular understanding of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, the church is governed by an understanding of the church meeting as ‘one person one vote’. However, I would argue that, more classically, the individualism found in the tradition is balanced by a strong sense of the covenantal formation of the Church, both in terms of the commitment of individual members to each other, but also in the sense of being taken up into a wider covenant in which the person and work of Jesus is the constitutive and binding operative factor, through the presence and work of the Spirit.

It is in the full encounter with, and recognition of, the ‘three dimensional’ nature of the current socio-religious context that the timely relevance to contemporary ecclesiology of the Baptist vision can be recognized. In this setting, issues of what might be called ‘epistemological praxis’ come to the fore, while questions of theological ethics emerge at the heart of both epistemology and practical ecclesiology. Such an approach rests upon a theologically prior conviction about the importance of religious believing as a freely chosen life orientation and commitment. It was this conviction that provided a basis for seeking the restoration of what was believed to be a New Testament pattern of Church life, and which in turn reinforced a differentiation between the Church and the social order, leading to a different kind of approach to being Christian in society and the state.

### *Implications for the State and Civil Society*

Turning now to the implications of these keynotes of Baptist tradition for matters of religion, state and society, Leonard Busher’s 1614 pamphlet entitled *Religion’s Peace*<sup>33</sup> had a subtitle which read: ‘Wherein is Contained Certain Reasons against Persecution for Religion’, and that significantly went on to speak of the positive implications of a “design for a peaceable reconciling of those that differ in opinion”. Also, in his classic work on religious liberty, Roger Williams argued that, in terms of both theology and the practicalities of state, “true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of diverse and contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile”, and he maintained that “an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation

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<sup>33</sup> Busher, ‘Religion’s Peace’, 1–81.

or a civil state confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh”.<sup>34</sup>

Having so far argued that the Baptist theological and ecclesiological principles that have been highlighted are those that can enable Christians more effectively to engage with our contemporary “three-dimensional” contexts for religion, state and society, in closing this chapter some ways are suggested (see the conclusion below) in which it might be possible also to develop these principles into resources that are capable of making a contribution to debate beyond Christian circles. As presented, these working principles are the equivalent of newspaper headlines. There is much that could be said in relation to them by way of qualification. They do not claim to be a detailed survey or to present the last word; they are intended to provoke reaction and engagement. But they are also meant to be taken seriously because in the context of a ‘three dimensional’ socio-religious reality, in parts of the Europe of today, the identification of ‘Europeanness’ (and/or whatever national version[s] of it), and ‘Christianness’ can reinforce the tendency to identify ‘our’ way of life with Christianity in a way that encourages policies, practices and attitudes that define people of religions other than Christianity as being somehow essentially ‘alien’. Especially where fault-lines of religious difference and sometimes of tension also map onto cultural and ethnic differences, the maintenance of forms religion that are bound up with national symbols of self-definition is at least potentially problematic. Under conditions of social crisis in which ‘communal scapegoating’ can develop and be exploited by extremist groups, the instrumentalization of religion in the service of cultural and national projects can have the danger of turning into projects for what might be called ‘religious cleansing’.

Just as the early Baptists’ commitment to religious freedom and to an associated ecclesiology and an scriptural hermeneutic challenged a totalizing religious vision of Christianity in which temporal structures were held to approximate to a divine blueprint, so today such an approach presents an alternative to instrumentalization of religion in the service of politics or the state, or politics or the state in the service of religion. It emphasizes instead an understanding of the contribution to public life that service based on religious motivations can make, but as one contribution alongside others. The patterns of Christendom were based on premises that are no longer pertinent to contemporary Church and society, but were

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<sup>34</sup> Williams in Groves, *The Bloody Tenent*, 4.

rooted in a context that has since been radically transformed by the twin impacts of secularization and religious plurality. In practical terms, this means it is necessary to find new ways of making a contribution to the wider society than those which rely upon the social, political, legal and constitutional institutionalization of position and role conferred by the inheritance of Christendom. This means that the Christian Churches need to consider taking positive steps towards divesting themselves of this inheritance and to learn to rely more upon the inherent power of that to which they seek to bear witness. But to do this requires alternative theological and ecclesiological resources.

It is the contention of this chapter that a Baptist theological and ecclesiological vision of the kind set out in this chapter can offer such resources because it makes a very basic methodological contribution that gives a far more prominent place to theological ethics than has hitherto been the case. It posits the context and content of the social and political (as well as specifically interreligious) relations of religious communities as an integral part of the central tasks of the Christian theology and practice. At the same time, rather than promoting a mere ‘adaptation’ of the Church to prevailing social trends, through its theologically rooted commitment to religious freedom it can provide an integrated theological basis for Christian attempts to engage with Europe’s ‘three dimensional’ socio-religious reality as the arena for contemporary Christian life and witness.

## **Conclusion**

### *“Working Principles” for Religion(s), State and Society Relationships in Europe*

These ‘working principles’ have been developed in dialogue with a number of groups and in a range of presentations and published forms. They are informed by the keynotes of the Baptist vision of Christianity, but are expressed in a way that tries to ‘translate’ this vision so that it can be engaged with by people of all faiths and none. They also reflect the author’s academic and practical engagement with issues of religion and belief plurality, society and the state, over the past quarter of a century. In the form they appear here, they are addressed specifically with reference to Christianity and to Europe, but they have also been set out in more generic forms.

*Principle 1: The Need for a Reality Check*

National and political self-understandings that exclude people of other than Christian religious traditions, either by design or by default, are historically speaking, fundamentally distorted. Politically and religiously such self-understandings are dangerous and need to be challenged.

*Principle 2: The Importance of Religious Inclusivity*

Religious establishments as well as other traditions and social arrangements that provide particular forms of religion with privileged access to the social and political institutions need to be re-evaluated. There is a growing need to imagine and to construct new structural forms for the relationship between religion(s), state(s) and society that can more adequately express an inclusive social and political self-understanding than those which currently privilege Christianity.

*Principle 3: The Imperative for Religious Engagement with the Wider Community*

Religious communities and traditions should beware of what can be seductive calls from within their traditions to form ‘religious unity fronts’ against what is characterised as ‘the secular state’ and what is perceived as the amorality and fragmentation of modern and post-modern society.

*Principle 4: The Need to Recognize the Specificity of Religions*

Religious traditions and communities offer important alternative perspectives to the predominant values and power structures of states and societies. Religions are a reminder of the importance of the things that cannot be seen, touched, smelled, tasted and heard, for a more balanced perspective on those things which can be experienced in these ways.

*Principle 5: The Importance of Not Marginalizing Religions from Public Life*

A tendency to assign religions to the private sphere will impoverish the state by marginalising important social resources and might unwittingly be encouraging of those reactive, backward- and inward-looking

expressions of religious life that are popularly characterised as fundamentalisms.

*Principle 6: The Need to Recognize the Transnational Dimensions of Religions*

Religious communities and traditions need to pre-empt the dangers involved in becoming proxy sites for imported conflicts involving their co-religionists in other parts of the world. But because they are themselves part of wider global communities of faith, religions have the potential for positively contributing to a better understanding of role of the states and societies of their own countries within a globalising world.

*Principle 7: The Imperative of Interreligious Dialogue*

Interreligious dialogue is an imperative for the religious communities and for the states and societies of which they are a part. There is a need to continue the task of developing appropriate interreligious structures at all levels within states and societies and in appropriate transnational and international structures.

***Zusammenfassung***

Dieses Kapitel versucht, einen Beitrag zur ökumenischen Entwicklung einer religiös glaubwürdigen und kontextuell angemessenen christlichen Theologie, Praxis und Ekklesiologie der interreligiösen Beziehungen zu leisten, indem es von besonderen Grundgedanken der baptistischen Tradition ausgeht. Zu den meisten Zeiten und an den meisten Orten hat die baptistische „Brechung“ (refraction) der christlichen Vision die Bedeutung der Religions- oder Glaubensfreiheit bekräftigt. Diese Haltung wurzelt nicht etwa in einem religiösen Relativismus oder Indifferentismus, sondern in einer spezifischen theologischen und ekklesiologischen Vision. Indem die Bedeutung dieser theologischen und ekklesiologischen Ressourcen vertreten wird, soll aber nicht unkritisch eine Tradition des Christentums über oder gegen andere gesetzt werden. Vielmehr wird dargelegt, dass jener „Stil“ des christlichen Zeugnisses, der durch ein theologisch fundiertes Verständnis der Religions- oder Glaubensfreiheit vorangebracht wird, in der Lage ist, eine Bescheidenheit und Integrität hervorzubringen, die sich so mit Realismus und Klarheit verbindet, wie es für ein zeitgenössisches christliches Leben in der sogenannten „drei-dimensionalen“ sozial-religiösen Wirklichkeit eines

Europa erforderlich ist, das durch ein christliches wie ein säkulares Erbe sowie seit Neuerem durch eine zunehmende religiöse Pluralität gekennzeichnet ist.

### ***Author Note***

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